

“Life’s Compartments”

Amos 8:4-7

September 22, 2013

18th Sunday After Pentecost

Compartments are very handy to have sometimes. We have little plastic compartments for our pills to be in. We have Tupperware storage compartments for our food. We have clothes compartments in dressers, chests of drawers, and closets. All of these do a very good job of keeping medicines, foods, and socks, underwear, shirts, and slacks separate from one another. That’s normally a good thing. It’s not such a good thing when we try to compartmentalize our lives and try to keep God in one part and all of our material possessions in another part. That was the effort made in Amos’ time and which is still being made today.

Amos was a prophet from Judah, the southern half of the divided kingdom, sent by God to prophesy against Israel, the northern half of that kingdom. Despite their unfaithfulness in the worship of the true God, the people of Israel were experiencing prosperous times. But, instead of seeing this prosperity as an opportunity to thank the Lord and serve the neighbor, they saw wealth as something to gain, enjoy, and then gain more. “The movers and shakers in Israel’s marketplaces were consumed with money, loan debts, interest, capital gains, and wealth. They had little time for the ‘weightier matters’ (Mt. 23:23) of justice, righteousness, and the love of [the Lord]. Their mantra was ‘there will never be enough to go around so we must continue to get more.’” (Lessing, p.508)

Their business ethics left a lot to be desired. They cheated, lied, used false weights, sold defective products (like chaff mixed in a bag of wheat), and even put their neighbors into slavery. They were not only breaking the 7th Commandment against stealing and the 5th Commandment against hurting or harming their neighbor, but their chief violation was against the 1st Commandment against having no other gods. Wealth and money had become their gods.

Yet they still observed their religion. They went to church for the religious festivals like the New Moon festival mentioned in the text and for the weekly Sabbath observances. Yet even while

they were being religious, they weren't being sincere. They would ask, "When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, cheating, exploiting our fellow Israelites, and selling defective products to earn a greater profit?" I imagine that, if they had watches back then, they would be looking at them impatiently, wishing the service would be shorter so that they could just be done with it and get back to the more important things which they really enjoyed.

They were able to sleep at night because they compartmentalized their lives. "Israel's businessmen divided their lives into water-tight compartments, one marked 'religion' and the other labeled 'marketplace'. 'Religion, after all, is religion,' [they said,] and as for the rest – well, business is business.'" (Lessing, p.510)

But compartments don't work so well with God. You can't separate business from religion, church life from every day life, or faith from action. You can't act one way in a certain situation and a different way in another situation and hope to fool God as the Israelites had. The text closes with these ominous words from the Lord: "The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: 'Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.'" The Lord was not fooled by their sin simply because they went through the religious motions. They would be held accountable if they did not repent. The Lord would remember their sin. As it turns out, they did not repent and 22 years later, the armies of Assyria would destroy their country and take their people as slaves off into exile.

Things haven't changed much in our present day. The thirst for wealth and material goods still exists today as it did in ancient Israel. "There is a sickness and madness in Western society called consumerism – the notion that life consists in having and getting and spending and controlling and using and eating. This system places stress on accumulation and believes that meaning and security comes by [having] 'more'." (Lessing, p.514)

Christians become involved in this sickness and madness just like anyone else. We trust wealth and think that it makes us safe and secure. We get caught up in the "having and getting and

spending and controlling and using and eating.” We devote our time in getting that which we want or need or in enjoying what we have and possess. Jesus says in our Gospel today, “You cannot serve God and money.” Yet we try to by compartmentalizing our lives. We think we can live in the consumerism part of our lives during the week as long as we come to church on Sundays to live in the religious part of our lives by fulfilling our religious duty. Yet, even when we are here, how many of us are like the ancient Israelites, impatiently waiting, looking at our watches, and wondering when the service is going to be over so that we get back to doing what we really like to do: getting more, having more, or enjoying more for ourselves?

We fool ourselves if we think we can fool God by compartmentalizing our lives into a material compartment and a religious compartment like the Israelites did. Each of us has one life which is neither material nor religious. It is simply the life given to us by God. Life is not composed of compartments which we can separate and open and close at various times. Each of us has one unified life.

We do not possess material things and spiritual things. We possess material things which have a spiritual aspect to them. By that, I mean all things which we have and possess are not ours, but are gifts of God. He created all things and gives those things to those whom He wills. For those who want to argue that they have worked long and hard to get what they have, I would ask, “Where did you get the skills, the intellect, the strength, and even the body to work long and hard?” Those, too, were given by God to you as free gifts to use. God gives us ourselves and all that we are and have to serve Him by serving our neighbor – the people around us, our church family, our physical families, and even ourselves.

But if that is all we see – the material wealth and goods with which God has so richly blessed all of us – we are missing out. God has so much more wealth to give us. The Israelites missed out on this in their mad effort to have more and enjoy more. Many people today – even Christians – miss

out on it too. It is the incomparable wealth which Jesus Christ came into this world to give us and all people.

The Bible says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” (2 Cor. 8:9) Jesus came into this world with all the power, might, and glory of the Son of God. Yet, He became poor. He set all of that aside for you so that each of you, through His poverty, might become rich beyond your wildest dreams.

Our debt to God because of our idolatry, greed, and lack of love and care was immense. It was a debt none of us could begin to pay. The wealthiest among us – even the wealthiest in the entire world – could not pay. Only Jesus could pay. As the catechism says, He “purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.” (Small Catechism, p.16) He did not use anything of this world to make that payment. All of the money, all of the wealth, all of the things which this world values the most combined could not pay the debt of even one of us. Our epistle reading for today spells it out: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.” (1 Tim. 2:5-6)

Did you hear that? Jesus gave Himself. He redeemed us. He bought us back. He paid the ransom “not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.” (Small Catechism, p.16) Jesus died on the cross as the sacrifice for your sins and mine. He observed the Sabbath day by resting in the tomb. He rose from death to life again on the first day of the week and the first day of an entirely new era.

You and I are now wealthy beyond anything we have now, could earn now, or imagine now. We have peace. Many people seek peace and hope that wealth and material possessions can provide it (which they can't). We have a peace that passes all human understanding because we are right with the one true God who created heaven and earth through the forgiveness of all our sins.

We have freedom from slavery to consumerism – if we want it. As Paul wrote to young Timothy, “Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.” (1 Tim. 6:6-8) And so we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” We ask only for enough and only for this day, neither complaining about the past nor worrying about the future.

What is the secret to contentment and freedom from consumerism in this often discontented world which is always striving for more? Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:11-13) With Christ living for us, in us, and through us with His strength, we can then be completely content, no matter what our outward circumstances might be.

But Jesus not only gives you strength for now. He gives you hope for the future – a future beyond your wildest dreams. God’s Word says, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9) Eternal life beyond the grave with all the wealth of heaven awaits you, me, and all who are in Christ Jesus.

So avoid the sin of the Israelites and the judgment they received from the Lord. Repent. Turn from the consumerism and materialism of this age and the idolatry and greed they produce. By the power of the Holy Spirit given to you in your Baptism turn to Christ and His true wealth found in the forgiveness of sins, a new life, and eternal salvation.

You don’t have to give away all that you have and live dirt poor. Money is not the root of all kinds of evil. Only the love of money is. Rather than viewing wealth and material goods as something you have to pursue for yourselves, see everything that you have and possess as gifts given to you by God to serve others. Use what the Lord has given you to serve your family, your

church, and your community, knowing and believing that God will always supply your need as you use His gifts in service to others.

Ultimately, compartmentalizing our lives is not only useless, but it is not necessary. We do not have to divide our lives between the spiritual and the material, the religious and the secular, or the selfless and the selfish. Each of us has one compartment – one life to live in our families, in our church, in our jobs, and in our communities. All that we have is a gift from God. All that we are to be about is serving God. Is that possible? It seems so unreal and perhaps a bit naïve. Yet what St. Paul said of himself also applies to us: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20) By God’s grace for Christ’s sake let us use all that we are by His grace and all that we have been given by His mercy to live out our lives by His power. Amen.